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# Rhetorical Commonsense and Child Molester Panic--A Queer Intervention

## **Comments**

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## Rhetorical Commonsense and Child Molester Panic--A Queer Intervention

Ian Barnard

I

In the famous opening lines of *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick proposes that

many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured--indeed fractured--by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male . . . . an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition. (1)

Sedgwick goes on to brilliantly lay out a set of oppositions that seem to have nothing necessarily to do with homosexuality, but that, she argues, in fact, intrinsically structure and are formatively shaped by the homosexual/heterosexual divide--for instance, active/passive, utopia/apocalypse, and innocence/initiation (11). Sedgwick's deconstructive and psychoanalytic epistemologies and methodologies help us to identify and think through homophobic and queerphobic ripples, reverberations, and displacements. Using Sedgwick's insights and methodologies as a theoretical/inspirational frame, I want to suggest that contemporary "sex panics" in the US and their rhetorical constructions (not necessarily two different things) offer sites where we might trace these phobic ripples, reverberations, and displacements.

This article focuses on constructions of and discourses around child molestation as one paradigmatic sex panic of 21<sup>st</sup> Century USA (and elsewhere).<sup>1</sup> In order to unpack some of the ways in which "child molester panic" can and does serve queerphobic agendas and ideologies, I'll offer speculative readings of two symptomatic contemporary representations of child molestation, one from popular culture and one from scholarship in our field. The television episode from a long running fiction crime series that I discuss in Section II below capitalizes on a combination of stranger (online pedophile predators) and familiar (child abuse in the family) child molester figures, reflecting a mix of popular sex panic mythology and social reality, if we accept Rubin's statistics that "most sex abuse is practiced at home and by family members" ("Blood" 38), and channeling both through homophobic tropes, displacements, and disavowals. The scholarly text that is the subject of Section III treats the Jerry Sandusky case, which to some extent reenacts this stranger-familiar combination, since Sandusky was not a stranger to the boys he was convicted of molesting, but not a "family" member, either, though he was described as a "father figure" to some of them. It's not surprising, then, that the discourse itself about this case should become imbricated in the convergences between mythology and social reality that characterize the fiction TV show.

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<sup>1</sup> Gayle Rubin's and Carole Vance's arguments in the 2011 "Rethinking Sex" issue of *GLQ* that 1970s and 1980s anti-porn feminism has transmuted into anti-sex trafficking feminism in the 21st century offer a pointed interrogation of another sex panic that is currently sweeping the US (Rubin, "Blood"; Vance, "Thinking"; for discussion of the heteronormative valences of discourses and campaigns against sex trafficking, see my "Sex Trafficking Rhetorics/Queer Refusal"). A suggestive parallel to Rubin's and Vance's identification of these feminist/anti-feminist paradigm shifts and continuities might see homophobic sex panics around AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s being recuperated and transformed into other kinds of homophobic panics in the 2000s and 2010s.

What I am calling "sex panics" seem to be ubiquitous these days--as ubiquitous as the news of the falling dominoes of same-sex marriage restrictions in the past few years. In popular culture, pedophilia is a hypersaturated signifier, often the "secret" that wraps up a plot or explains a character's dysfunction and/or shame (e.g., *Broadchurch*, *Mystic River*, and even Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac* and Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*). And the sanctity and purity of children, their supposed sexual innocence, invariably top the list of taboos that cannot be questioned and that are able to summon up apparently limitless reserves of unreflective fear, panic, anger, and hysteria. As I began working on this article, I was engulfed in the brouhaha surrounding Miley Cyrus' performance at the 2013 MTV video music awards, which was as much about shock at Cyrus' transformation from Disney's supposedly asexual child Hannah Montana into an avowedly sexual young woman as it was about putatively feminist and anti-racist critiques of her and her dance troupe's choreography. And just a few weeks later, the top story on CNN's home page that popped up on my laptop screen relayed the shocking results of what is variously called a "predator test" or "puppy test": much to the horror of their parents, many young children seem willing to accompany a stranger (a reporter playing child molester) to his van on the pretext of feeding his puppy (Gonzalez). Rubin points out that the

fear of sexual abduction, rape, and murder of children by strangers has substantially reshaped many areas of society. It is a major concern of parents, and haunts the young. Yet it is relatively rare. According to *Newsweek*, more children drown in swimming pools each year than are abducted by strangers . . . [yet] few parents are as afraid of swimming

pools as they are of “sex offenders,” ostensibly lurking behind every bush and lamppost. (“Blood” 38)

The sex panic→children coupling also crucially hinges on constructions and fears of queerness as a third link in the metonymic chain. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman discusses the ways in which homosexuality is tied to pedophilia (Chapter 2), and describes the figure of the pedophile who fails “to penetrate into the circle of heterosexual desire” (112-13). The pedophile/queer is opposed to the figure of the Child. Most (in)famously, Edelman charts the sacrosanct status of “the Child as the emblem of (heteronormative) futurity’s unquestioned value” (*No Future* 4), while also pointing to the irony of “the cult of the child” permitting “no shrines to the queerness of boys and girls,” for queerness brings childhood to an end (19), echoing Sedgwick’s acerbic response to the denial to children of education in queerness (*Tendencies* 2-3, 154-64), and exposing how homage to the Child serves to forcefully curtail the lives and well-being of actual children. Jack Halberstam criticizes Edelman for implicitly associating women with heteronormativity (118), a critique echoed more recently by Maggie Nelson, who complains about queerness being conflated with a gay male sexuality that is unpolluted by procreative femininity (67). In addition, Halberstam argues that children are queer by default, and so need to be socialized into heteronormativity (27, 118-21), a thesis also forwarded by Kathryn Bond Stockton (*Queer Child*) and others, and an additional rebuke to Edelman’s construction of the Child as the sign of heteronormativity. I am not persuaded by these efforts to undo—or at least qualify--Edelman’s argument, since Edelman is very clear that he is not writing about literal children: the Child “is not to be confused with the lived experience of any historical children” (*No Future* 11).

Rather, he is interested in the rhetorical and phantasmatic construction of the figure of the Child and the ways in which this construction creates and sustains heteronormativity and a perhaps surprising host of metonymically linked epistemologies and ideologies (futurity, teleology, etc.).<sup>2</sup> The ease with which “child molestation” could be exchanged for “queerness” in Edelman’s aphorism, “[*Q*]ueerness names the side as those *not* ‘fighting for the children’”(No Future 3, emphasis in original), traces the extent of child molestation’s incoherence and queerness’s (and queer panic’s) foundationalism, and the politically portentous imbrication of each in the other in the shape-shifting landscape of contemporary sex panics.<sup>3</sup>

The potential scope and consequences of sex panics are poignantly captured by Rubin in a 2011 reflection on her own influential "Thinking Sex" article (and are reflected in the vitriol directed at Rubin for her ideas on these topics<sup>4</sup>):

I clearly underestimated the size of the impending tsunami about the sexuality of the young. When I finished writing "Thinking Sex" in 1983, the outlines of the panics over children were clear, but their scale and duration were not. The panics that seemed episodic in 1983 now are a permanent feature of our social and political landscape. When the history of the last quarter of a century is finally written, one of the distinguishing features of this period will be the extent to which legitimate concerns for

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<sup>2</sup> Edelman, in fact, also discusses children’s indoctrination into heterosexuality (*No Future*, Chapter 2), so his thesis might not be as antithetical to the agendas of Halberstam et al, as we might be led to believe. See Huffer for further discussion of the critique of Edelman’s work, and, more generally, of the relationship between feminism and queer theory.

<sup>3</sup> See Lancaster for further discussion of the relationship between homosexuality and sex panics.

<sup>4</sup> See Rubin (“Blood”) and Duggan for documentations of these events.

the sexual welfare of the young have been vehicles for political mobilizations and policies with consequences well beyond their explicit aims, some quite damaging to the young people they are supposed to help. The rhetoric of child protection has anchored many conservative agendas with respect to intensifying women's subordinate status, reinforcing hierarchical family structures, curtailing gay citizenship, opposing comprehensive sex education, limiting the availability of contraception, and restricting abortion, especially for young women and girls. ("Blood" 37)

Rubin goes on to give, as an example of how sex panics can be used to bait and switch a range of oblique results, California's now-discredited "Three Strikes" law passed in the wake of the abduction, rape, and murder of a young girl. The law effected the incarceration of many Californians for minor (mainly drug-related) offences, and contributed to the "out-of-control expansion" of California's prison system, and a corresponding depletion of state funds for children's education (38).

Bait and switch tactics and effects also infiltrate the fabric of sex panics in the sense that specific fears and prejudices activate or are used, whether consciously or unconsciously, to condemn or demonize by association institutions, identities, and practices that may not on their own be able to carry the weight of popular condemnation. Discourses that ridicule sex work and sex workers, for instance, or that demonize sex trafficking or particular sexual practices and identities often use broad brushstrokes that cover a wide range of individuals and practices in order to evoke public panic, outrage, condemnation, fear, and prejudice. In her 1984 rumination on the beleaguered Barnard



Sex Conference of 1982 at which Rubin first presented her ideas for "Thinking Sex," Vance noted how the conference detractors' reduction of considerable "diversity of thought and experience" to "pornography, S/M, and butch/femme--the anti-pornographers' counterpart to the New Right's unholy trinity of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll," was "an example of the effective use of symbols to instigate a sex panic" ("Epilogue" 434). False, reductive, and irrational denotative and connotative associative connections can create tainting linkages while also serving to foreclose critique: rhetorical commonsensicalness (who would not be against child molestation or sex trafficking, for instance?) serves to suture together some quite divergent panics at the same time that it silences critical interrogation around questions of careful representation and the ideologies and ethics of the Law.

In *Lacan in Public*, Christian Lundberg argues that tropes are the "general condition for the possibility of rhetoric" (76) rather than a special class of rhetorical action (a view Lundberg also attributes to Lacan). Charles Denroche similarly makes the case in *Metonymy and Language* for metonymy's ubiquity and foundationalism in "conceptualization" and communication. Conceptualizations of the irreducibility of language, communication, and representation such as those of Lundberg and Denroche (and Lacan) supplement poststructuralism's insistence on the necessary gaps between signifier and signified, and highlight the ways in which linguistic meaning, in particular, accumulates by means of chains of associations invoked and disavowed. Lundberg builds on Lacan's own treatment of rhetoric to bring rhetoric and psychoanalysis evocatively together, and thereby to rectify overly instrumentalist accounts of rhetoric, noting that even critical/cultural accounts of rhetoric tend to "reduce the work of rhetoric to a radical

account of context and intersubjective negotiation without remainder” (20). “Remainder” is precisely what interests me here. For Lundberg this refers primarily to the “failed unicity” that structures and characterizes the subject’s accession to language and the Law, but I also invoke Lundberg’s suggestive understanding of rhetoric to include conscious and unconscious slippages in meaning that are marked by metonymy and other tropes, and that expose individual and cultural residues—sometimes unnamable, sometimes inarticulable--of historical and social structures of feeling and ongoing ideological apparatuses. Explicating, via Gilbert Chaitin, Lacan’s account of the economy of trope, Lundberg explains that “as a subject begins to take on concrete empirical form, it accretes habits of relation and identity by substituting ‘another signifier for the first’” (73). So these rhetorical move(ment)s are not without material consequence. Lundberg notes that for Lacan, metaphor is not merely descriptive, but is in fact productive (80-81). In the spirit of theories of epistemic rhetoric, we can apply this observation to other tropes, too, in investigating the ways in which they create associations, conjure up (new) meaning, and even construct (discursive) realities.

By invoking what I find to be particularly resonant concepts and methodologies from psychoanalytic theory, and in the spirit of Sedgwick and deconstruction, I hope to clear a space away from conspiracy or conscious intent on the parts of the rhetors I treat in the sections below, and to make space for the barely said whose traces must be excavated, necessarily from “nothing,” given the rhetorical and metonymic force of heteronormativity and the unhelmability of the unconscious. As Lundberg laments, in the spirit of Diane Davis’ *Inessential Solidarity*, and almost glossing Halberstam’s *Queer Art of Failure*, “[C]ritical and cultural rhetorical theory often produces a reductive account of

texts by reading exclusively through logics of form, articulation, or context at the expense of the ways that these logics fail" (118). What would readings look like that attend to "failure," dislodge context, or work through illogic?

In what follows, I purposefully choose what we might assume are discordant texts or genres or fields, since their juxtaposition unsettles disciplinary expectations that rhetorical criticism (my second text) should critically interrogate popular culture and social assumptions (my first text). I bring the presumptively discordant texts into dialogue/collision precisely in order to suggest the continuity across politics, registers, disciplines, and institutions of the kinds of repressions, displacements, and phobias I want to chart. My postmodern inclination to level scholarly/lay hierarchies takes on a queer specificity in the contexts of the particular texts and topics I am treating, so I also propose, in solidarity with Halberstam's homage to "low theory" in *The Queer Art of Failure*, that this juxtaposition might gesture toward a queer methodology, a proposition to which I return at the end of this article.

## II

The pop culture text par excellence that reiteratively encapsulates contemporary sex panics is the long running, popular, and critically acclaimed television crime series *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. Each episode is introduced by an iconic knowing male voice intoning, "In the criminal justice system, sexually based offenses are considered especially heinous. In New York City, the dedicated detectives who investigate these vicious felonies are members of an elite squad known as the Special Victims Unit." If the omniscient narrator reveals no apparent awareness of the irony of 366 television program

episodes (as of this writing; the show has recently been renewed for a 17<sup>th</sup> season) pruriently attending to the "sexually based offenses" that are so "especially heinous," the show's narratives themselves seem to be richly aware of these contradictions, or at least to activate them--an awareness/activation that perhaps contributes to its commercial and critical success.

By way of explication and illustration, I'll discuss in some detail a representative 2006 episode called "Web" whose "especially heinous" crime is pedophilia, and in which the slippages and disjunctions I have been hinting at unravel (or accumulate?) to quite resonant effect. The necessarily formulaic nature of the show, its thematic focus, and the longevity of most of its main characters mean that many of the rhetorical arcs I trace in this episode speak to a panoply of telling catechreses in other episodes and in the series as a whole, as the show itself is non-linearly imbricated in the sex panics it documents, creates, and muddles, and through which it educates and entertains. "Web" is part of a cluster of episodes (e.g., "Quarry," Season 6; "Learning Curve," Season 13; "Manhattan Vigil," Season 14) that conveniently brings together the specters of child molestation and queerness, a conjunction whose associative slippage I am excavating and whose iteration here foreshadows/undercuts the scholarly article I treat in section III below.

In "Web," Teddy, a teenager who was sexually molested in the past by his father, turns out to be producing for (male) pedophiles sexually explicit webcasts involving himself and his younger brother. When the detectives from the Special Victims Unit pursue him, he escapes into a coven of pedophiles, only to discover that these men are using him and don't really love him as he thought they did. (I'm here using some of the

language from the show, as I will do for much of the remainder of this section.<sup>5</sup>) The episode ends with Teddy bemoaning his fate as now alone in the world and unloved. Detective Stabler quickly assures him that he is wrong, that his family are the ones who really love him. Teddy doubts that his family will forgive him for his abuse of his younger brother, but is soon proven wrong when his mother enters his hospital room to embrace him and reassure him that she understands what he has done. The counterposition of (biological) family unit to child molestation is visually accomplished when the Assistant US Attorney informs Detective Stabler outside Teddy's hospital room that she will grant Teddy immunity "in exchange for his testimony against the pedophiles": Stabler stands in the foreground lit in blue, while Teddy and his mother are bathed in a warm yellow light behind the window and blind slats of the room that separate and enclose the "family," her hand on his brow. I will return later to Stabler's pointed exclusion from the family, but for now want to note how the set up of this closing shot, the use of color, and the verbal/visual opposition between "pedophiles" and "family" work to refute the statistical reality of abuse within the family and instead locate child molestation in anti- and "fake" family structures and ideologies (indeed, the story's own admissions of the reality of molestation within the family are retracted when we discover that Teddy's father did not molest his younger son, despite initial assumptions to

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<sup>5</sup> As Phillip Jenkins points out in his book on "Changing Concepts of the Child Molester in Modern America," conceptualizations of the sexual abuse of children and the meaning of this abuse have changed over time, and the terminology used to describe such abuse is ideologically inflected and historically specific. Any cultural critic working on the topic faces a double bind: to use the terms uncritically might suggest an absorption of these constructions; however, to point to their constructedness (e.g., with quotation marks or qualifiers such as "alleged") might suggest that the critic doesn't believe victims' accounts or questions the material reality of the abuse (xi-8).

the contrary, and in the episode's representational trajectory of Teddy himself as a victim of pedophiles rather than as an abuser of his younger brother).

The exemplificatory conserving force of this episode's ending uses child molester panic to reinscribe the family--not quite nuclear, however, since the now reformed pedophile father is not present, but perhaps close enough for the 21st century? The horrors of child molestation are countered with the love and comfort of family, despite the horrors of the nuclear family (ex-pedophile father, and even Teddy, who has made internet sex broadcasts with his younger brother). Certainly, as with the cult of the Child, there is a weighted history to discourses of family and the racial, class, sexual, and gendered affiliations that are variously advocated and sanctified in the name of family,<sup>6</sup> and to what Michael Warner and Harriet Malinowitz have termed, respectively, "reprosexuality" and "pronatalist culture" to designate social, political, and economic institutions, operations, imperatives, and people (often, nowadays, including glbt people) that privilege normative sexualities and family structures. In 1991, Warner wrote in the introduction to the "Fear of a Queer Planet" issue of *Social Text*,

The family may be a site of solidarity and value for racial and ethnic struggle, for example, but current definitions of the family are abysmally oppressive for lesbians and gays. Familial language deployed to describe sociability in race- or gender-based movements (sisterhood, fatherhood, fatherland, mother tongue, etc.) can be a language of exile for queers. (12-13)

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<sup>6</sup> For further discussion of the coercive teleology of rhetorics of "family," see Edelman, *No Future*, Chapter 1; Halberstam 71ff.; Nair 5-6; Sedgwick, *Tendencies* 5-6.

The resilience of the family's exclusivity is notated by the cementing moment of family solidarity in *Law and Order: SVU*, even in the face of what has changed politically and socially in the time since Warner's diagnosis and given the proliferation of queer families since then, and, now, the increasing possibilities of same-sex marriage, and even in the wake of a variety of queer counter-discourses that have attempted to co-opt or reinterpret conceptualizations of family, both more conservatively, as in the same-sex marriage movement, and more radically, as in Harlem's drag ball culture depicted in Jennie Livingston's much-debated 1992 documentary film *Paris is Burning*.

In the *Law and Order: SVU* "Web" episode, Teddy's reintegration into the normative family explicitly counters the network of men with whom Teddy associated online with the traditional and presumptively heteronormative family. The "family" of choice with whom Teddy identified at the beginning of the episode is exposed as a "fake" family that not only didn't really love Teddy but that also epitomizes depravity and debauchery, orthogonally presaging recent pronouncements by the Mormon Church in the US denouncing LGBT families as "counterfeit" (Ring). Legitimate family here, no matter how beleaguered, seems to stand in opposition to "special heinousness," and "special heinousness" is linked narratively, associatively, and connotatively to male homosexuality. Although the members of the pedophile network may not be gay (the gender of victims of pedophilia is not necessarily an indication of the hetero-, homo-, bi- or other sexual orientation of their predators), they are tainted by homoerotic practices, and homosexual panic structures the narrative of the episode as a whole: a schoolmate, Gordy, taunts Teddy, "Up yours, fairy boy" when Teddy confronts him about plastering pictures from Teddy's website all over the school; Teddy goads Stabler with "Why you so

interested in me? Those pictures turn you on?" when Stabler questions him; and when Detective Tutuola responds to Gordy's, "Teddy's a freak and everyone needs to know it," with "What, did he touch you?," Gordy fires back defensively, "Dude, I'm not a fag." Later, when Stabler instructs a colleague, Ruben Morales, to "play gay" online in order to entrap a child molester, the execution of the order almost serves as a punishment for Morales' disobeying orders earlier and a self-punishment for Morales to compensate for the guilt he feels about his role in the rape of his 15 year old nephew (Morales bought the computer that his nephew used to arrange a liaison with an older man). Gayness forms the motif of a story that is not ostensibly about gayness, while homophobia and internalized homophobia ensure that gayness is properly abjected. The gay-baiting, homosexual panic, and homoeroticism that thematize the episode suggest that child molestation may be a ruse, or, at least, that child molestation may stand for something else, however unconscious, fuzzy, and unthought out that substitution may be.

For the story is not a straightforward case of homophobic prejudice. This "something else" is presented quite ambivalently, since the "gay play" in which many of the supposedly "non heinous" characters indulge may in its repetition and disavowal represent longing and desire as much as or instead of disgust and repudiation (hardly a surprise). Thus while at first glance the show seems to be using child molester panic to shore up the heterosexual family, in fact, the "family," too, plays an ambivalent role in/against this metonymic chain of slippage, conflation, and contradiction. Although the return to family at the conclusions of the story apparently serves to expel specters of queerness conjured up in the politically safe object of contempt (pedophilia), the pull of the dysfunctional heteronormative nuclear family emblemized by the child molestation



in its midst unsettles the queer/family binary, an unsettling that, as I explain below, is most blatantly enacted in scenarios of entrapment and violence, two emblematic motifs of homosexual panic.

The "Web" of the episode's title has a triple resonance. Both internet and pedophile networks are metonymically sutured to the presumably sinister connotation of a spider's web of entrapment. But other--far more interesting--types of entrapment also manifest themselves in this episode. In the one especially bizarre scene I've already mentioned, Morales poses as a 15 year old boy in order to flirt with a male child molester online following Detective Stabler's instruction. Stabler even uses the second person "you" to merge Morales' persona with the 15 year old boy Morales is ventriloquizing online: "tell him you don't like girls . . . . tell him you are a virgin." The ease with which the two policemen come up with their convincing lines (the entrapment works), coupled with Stabler's physically violent reaction to one of the child molesters when he confronts him in person, and given the eruptions of gay-baiting I enumerated earlier, corroborate the narrative as a scene of disavowal and displacement, and, especially in the case of Stabler's violence, vividly enacts the (il)logic of homosexual panic articulated so memorably by Sedgwick in *Between Men* and elsewhere.

In fact, this episode of *SVU*'s problematization of its protagonists' moral earnestness, a characteristic of the series as a whole, and here represented in the scene of entrapment and Stabler's vulnerable violence, together with the tenuousness of the nuclear family's happy ending, expose sex panics' unconscious and suggest that, perhaps contrary to our expectations, popular culture may be more aware of, or at least more willing to admit to, the social anxieties and displacements that may shape and inform

contemporary sex panics and the crusades around them than the scholarly article I discuss in section III below. At the end of the episode, as Stabler watches the reunion between Teddy and his mother, we are all too aware that Stabler himself, despite his fierce protection of family and discourses of family in the show, has a fractured relationship with his own family, a family that is only intermittently represented in the arc of the season's storyline, leaving him as a single male figure who seems to be an outsider to the nuclear family narratives he protects, not too unlike the child molesters he so zealously pursues. Sex panics turn in upon themselves, are undone.

### III

My second symptomatic and suggestive text, then, comes in the form of a 2012 *jac* article by Henry Giroux and Susan Searls Giroux, for my purposes conveniently titled "Scandalous Politics: Penn State and the Return of the Repressed in Higher Education," although the repressed that I see returning is quite different from the one that is conjured up by Giroux and Giroux, inoculated as they are by the copula of the article's joint authorship inscribing them into (patriarchal) heterosexual marriage. I am interested in this piece precisely because of its social justice credentials (authors, topic, journal, discipline) and the matter-of-factness of its outrage—these attributes point to my larger goal of asking not how obviously homophobic rhetorics circulate, but instead of looking at how panic resides in their inverse, and tracing the continuities among lay discourses, popular culture, and the rhetorical criticism that purports to expose the ideological underpinnings of the first two regimens.

In this article, Giroux and Giroux conceptualize the Sandusky debacle as symptomatic of what they call "the larger war on youth in America" (57), as evidenced in the corporatization and militarization of universities in the US. While the authors do attend to the particulars of the Sandusky case, they also see in it a case study that allegorizes "the shocking lengths to which rich and powerful people and institutions will go in order to cover up the most horrific crimes and to refuse responsibility for egregious violations that threaten their power, influence, and brand names" (61) and the extent to which "[b]ig money derived from external sources has changed the culture of universities across the United States" (65). Heinous crimes, indeed. I also see some high-stakes allegories at play here, but in the text of Giroux and Giroux as much as in the texts and events they treat. Giroux and Giroux set up their tropological argument quite explicitly: "The lesson here is that abuse of young people comes in many forms" (73). Ironically, the authors' charge against the media for deflecting "attention from the egregious sexual assault of young boys" in the media's focus on the fall of Joe Paterno (74) can be leveled at their own article, at least half of which is devoted to chronicling the "contexts" that enabled and that are the fallout from Sandusky's crimes (Sandusky was found guilty of 45 charges of sex abuse in 2012). The language of moral decay that the authors use to characterize the Sandusky "scandal" (to use the authors' opening noun, and drawing on the "scandalous" of their article title) together with their desire to cast the case as a symbol of national crisis, enables the panic and phobia that, pace Foucault, draw on collective (hegemonic) memory's reminiscences about queer menace and queer panic. My point here is not that Sandusky's actions are not to be condemned, but that the apocalyptic moralism conjured up by the authors' language ("alarms about the collapse of

public values,” “this revolting series of events,” democracy and values “in jeopardy,” “vile,” “desecration,” “the most horrific crimes,” “egregious crimes,” “egregious acts,” etc.) together with their focus on youth (the words “young boys,” “youth,” “young people,” and “children” appear nine times in the first two pages of the article alone) set up an inexorable metonymic chain that recapitulates child molestation as the apotheosis of horror, and inevitably sweeps up queerness in its circle of panic, as I suggest in the remainder of this section.

While I share the authors' dismay at the anti-intellectualism flaunted by many university stakeholders, and applaud their contention that the sexism, misogyny and violence that “run through American culture” are learned by youth at universities (66), it seems to me that the concern of Giroux and Giroux about “youth in America” is, in fact, a very gendered concern about boys and men, as I elaborate below.<sup>7</sup> This concern shares metonymic space with homosexual panic, to return to the analytic apparatus activated by Sedgwick in *Between Men*, and, in addition, may signal an attempt to recuperate traditional constructions of masculinity, perhaps in the wake of feminist, gay, queer, and transgender challenges to these constructions. We also see larger cultural anxieties about boys and men funneled into educational institutions in, for instance, alarmist calls to action by educators and cultural critics on the “boy crisis” in K-12 schools and proposals to segregate school children by gender or assign more “boy friendly” readings in English classes, apparently oblivious of the sexist, heterosexist, and cisgenderist implications of

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<sup>7</sup> Much of Henry Giroux's other *jac* work also is concerned with youth and children (e.g., “Beyond Neoliberal,” “Locked Up,” “Memories,” “Politics,” “Youth in the Empire”) and with questions of masculinity and discourses around and about boys and men (e.g., “From *Manchild*,” “Private Satisfaction”). Some of the work on “youth” seems to be primarily about boys/men (e.g., “Memories”), though Giroux doesn't make this explicit.

these proposals.<sup>8</sup> So an overlapping tissue of different cultural and educational contexts inflects the trajectory and effects of the concern of Giroux and Giroux for youth in the US, too.

In their *jac* article, Giroux and Giroux are responding specifically to attacks on working class people and culture (and this is true of much of Henry Giroux's other work as well). From the retroactive histories of revolutionary movements, we now understand how the familiar trope of single issue politics that characterized (and continues to characterize) some political and intellectual paradigms delimits identity by expunging the Other. Certainly, the article by Giroux and Giroux demonstrates that its authors are attuned to multiple axes of power and identity. But their text also intimates how in the 21st century class consciousness (for example) can be asserted at a much more subtle expense of the recuperation of reactionary configurations of gender. In addition, such recuperations can serve to shore up reductive understandings of working class identities at the same time that, for some readers, the political urgency of the authors' critique of corporatism insulates their argument from critical interrogation.

In the sense that class displaces gender, even though gender is still invoked, a psychoanalytic reading of the the *jac* article might infer that its unconscious precipitates rhetorical conflicts around gender identities and constructions. The authors do urge the contesting of conventional gender roles, for instance, when, via *New York Times* columnist Steve Kettmann, they argue that big money sports exacerbate aggressive masculinity (68-69). They also invoke Penn State professor Sophia McClennen's lament

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Harris, Loveless. For representative thoughtful counterarguments to this by now conventional wisdom about the "boy crisis" and its gender-segregated solutions, see DiPrete and Buchmann, Kimmel.

that the coteries of men involved in the Sandusky scandal fail to create a space for an "understanding of what alternative models of masculinity might look like" (69).

However, like the *Law and Order: SVU* "Web" episode, the *jac* article is structured by doubleness: in addition to its critique of masculinist cultural and emotional structures, it also evinces anxiety about the erosion of conventional gender roles and even an unconscious recuperation of these roles in the wake of homosexual panic.

In the second sentence of their *jac* article, the authors write, "Comprehending all of the factors that enabled Jerry Sandusky to perpetrate the decade-long serial abuse of young boys is very challenging to say the least--like finding an intellectual foothold in a bottomless pit" (570). There are a couple of things I'd like to draw out of this evocative sentence (many more things could be drawn from it). First, even though the article was published before Sandusky's trial took place, it's striking that the authors assume Sandusky's guilt, as they do throughout the article, despite an obligatory "allegedly" and "appears" in two places (61, 62). The assumption of guilt mirrors many pre-verdict journalistic accounts of the scandal--one CNN commentator wrote during the trial, "Yet calling these witnesses 'alleged' victims, as we must absent a verdict, nonetheless feels callous" (Wertheim). It's almost as if the scene of child molestation causes a collapse--parallel to the moral collapse lamented by Giroux and Giroux--in the procedurals of rigorous critical analysis that supposedly distinguish scholarly from lay discourses. My second point about the sentence from the *jac* article picks up on the authors' seemingly irrelevant identification of the gender of Sandusky's alleged victims, contrary to contemporary common practice in many mainstream media outlets eager to avoid the appearance of inciting or reproducing homophobic prejudices by drawing attention to

homoerotic possibilities in suspected criminal contexts (parallel to a desire to avoid the appearance of racism by identifying the races of suspects of color in suspected crimes that are not *prima facie* race-based). This pattern, too, is repeated--rather insistently--throughout the article. A few pages later, for instance, this gender identification happens six times in a single paragraph, including references to Sandusky having "gained unfettered access to *male* youths through a range of voluntary roles" and Mike McQueary witnessing "Sandusky raping a young *boy*" (61, my emphasis). On the following page, Giroux and Giroux rehearse the McQueary accusation, but this time add that "Mike McQueary reported to celebrated coach Joe Paterno that he saw Sandusky having anal intercourse with a ten-year-old boy in one of the football facility's showers" (62). It's hard not to read the unnecessary specificity of male-male anal intercourse here--the fulcrum site of phobic and distancing discourses about gay men--other than as an outburst or seepage of shock and/or prurience on the part of Giroux and Giroux, and as designed to elicit a similarly phobic response from their *jac* readers, or at least as producing that result. As if in elaboration of Sedgwick's *Epistemology* opening, and echoing Leo Bersani's somber 1980s AIDS-era diagnosis of gay anal intercourse's cultural resonance in "Is the Rectum a Grave?," Edelman notes that male homosexual "sodomitical relations" carry an "extraordinarily potent, though phobically charged, relation to the signifying conventions of the West" (*Homographesis* 174). By way of historicizing this ambitious claim, Edelman points to the ways in which "horror and violent denial seem indissociable from the representation of [male] homosexuality" (*ibid*) in his discussion of a 19<sup>th</sup> century French visitor's account of a London mob attacking a group of men convicted of sodomitical intent. Horror and denial varnish the conflicting impulses

around which sex panics continue to swirl. In *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson abstracts Edelman's reading of Freud's Wolf Man's memory of discovering his parents having sex "a tergo" in terms of both fear and desire, and as glossing social homophobia, the closet, and homosexual panic: "the Wolf Man's subsequent fear of his father is a fear not of castration, but of his own homosexual desire in a world that 'won't have it'" (Nelson 69).<sup>9</sup> These conflictedly hyperbolic responses to sodomy architecturalize the structure of homosexual panic, also pointing to its instability, and the necessarily diffuse apparatuses of its expression.

The connotative heat that Giroux and Giroux generate around "anal intercourse" is reminiscent of popular media accounts of the Jeffrey Dahmer trial in the early 1990s, where it was often difficult to tell if it was Dahmer's crimes or the specter of homosexual sex that generated the rhetor's repulsion.<sup>10</sup> Near the beginning of the "Web" episode of *SVU* discussed in section II above, the revelation that Teddy was sexually abused by his father is confirmed by Teddy's mother's matter-of-fact confirmation that Teddy's father "pled guilty to sodomy." Since sodomy's persistent lay association with (consensual) male homosexuality (and, specifically, anal intercourse) lingers in this episode despite its proscription in this particular configuration being struck down in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003), and despite its legal deployment to cover a variety of sex acts and sex crimes, some still illegal, some no longer illegal, we can read the metonymic concatenation of sodomy/child molestation across *SUV* and the Giroux and Giroux text in terms of the resilience of and reinvestment in putatively discarded taboos and phobias.

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<sup>9</sup> For further discussion of the association of anal intercourse with sexual relations between men, see Freedman Chapter 9.

<sup>10</sup> See my "The Racialization of Sexuality" for an extended analysis of the phobic discourses surrounding and constructing the Dahmer case.



In the paragraph immediately following the one with the six gendered references, Giroux and Giroux write, "As tantalizingly sensational as the media have found these events, the scandal is about much more than a person of influence using his power to sexually assault innocent young boys" (61). At this juncture I won't belabor the point that Giroux and Giroux have blown their own cover by accusing the media of tantalizing sensationalism. But I am interested in the almost complete convergence here between the ideologies and strategies of, on the one hand, popular media and other public discourses, and, on the other hand, the *jac* article, a convergence that is epitomized in that final phrase "innocent young boys," one of many platitudes about the case that pepper the article, in addition to other popular clichés about the topic of child molestation in general. How often have we not read critical rhetorical analyses in other contexts that point to problematic constructions of innocent victims (as if some victims are guilty or as if some victims are more deserving of their fates than others), not to mention work in children's literature and child studies in general on the ideological ruses at stake in historically and culturally specific representations of children and childhood as innocent?<sup>11</sup> Here, though, on this topic, critical consciousness seems to be usurped by commonplace. In the same

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<sup>11</sup> See Gordon for a discussion of the ways in which women and children are constructed as "innocent" in the media. Scholars working in fields like child studies and children's literature have developed an impressive body of work analyzing the historical roots of current constructions of children and childhood in diverse cultures, pointing to the temporal and cultural specificity of these constructions, and exposing and contesting their ideological underpinnings and effects. Sample work in this arena includes Ariès; Honeyman; Kincaid, *Child-Loving* and *Erotic Innocence*; Nodelman; Rose; Steedman; Stockton, *Queer Child*; the 2016 *GLQ* special issue on "The Child Now" (22.4); and the anthology *Children in Culture*, edited by Lesnik-Oberstein. See also Chapter 5 of Hesford's *Spectacular Rhetorics* for discussion of Western constructions of non-Western children and childhood.

vein, the Law is taken as given. Issues of consent and age of consent remain uninterrogated.<sup>12</sup>

We can see sex panics at work here in multiple guises and to a variety of effects. Popular rhetorical representations and understandings of children are recapitulated, but in the service of cumulatively evoking anxiety about the status and identities of boys and men via homosexual panic. Tellingly, the authors cite a long quote from Katha Pollitt that ends with the question, "If Sandusky had abused little girls, let alone teenage or adult women, would he be in trouble today?" (Giroux and Giroux 69), but make no reference to this question in their discussion of the quote. The operative point and point of concern for Giroux and Giroux seems to be precisely that Sandusky did not abuse girls or women. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick does specify that the 20<sup>th</sup> Century West's crisis of homo/heterosexual definition is "indicatively male" (1), and certainly the trappings of child molester panic that are so ubiquitous in contemporary culture are indicatively male. Also, Sedgwick's theorization of "homosexual panic" speaks specifically to phobia around male homoeroticism vis-à-vis (perceived) threats to and efforts to recuperate patriarchal masculinity. This is not to deny the panics, threats, and violences of child molestation where women are the abusers and/or girls the victims, and it's not to imply that lesbophobia, sexism, and other gynophobic (sex) panics don't take on their own particularly pernicious permutations as they are intricately in and also separate from queer panics more generally, but rather to recognize the specific ways in which "reproductive

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<sup>12</sup> For some critical perspectives on age of consent laws and questions of children's sexuality, see Califia, Freedman (Chapters 7 and 8), Lancaster, Rubin ("Blood," "Thinking").

futurism” makes gay men (and men who are perceived to be gay) and their rippling circles of associations particularly vulnerable to sex panics around children.

#### IV

We live in a contemporary culture of sex panics, especially in the US. And, certainly, hysteria about child molestation is now endemic to this culture. This is not to say, of course, that there is no such thing as child molestation or that child molestation isn't a bad thing, or to deny the value of decades of feminist work on rape in general, and sexual abuse of girls (and all children) in particular. This work has played a pivotal role in making the sexual abuse of children visible; quashing (white) male assumptions of propriety over female bodies; undoing the inoculation of men against charges of raping their wives and children through a hard-fought revolution in legal and political conceptualizations of consent, citizenship, and subjectivity; and ongoing struggles around preconceptions and understandings of male sexuality and privilege. But this work does not absolve us from questioning the rhetorical ends to which child molestation is discursively deployed. In her account of the changing definitions and understandings of rape in the US over the past two centuries, and of how the “modern feminist movement expanded the definition of rape to include all nonconsensual sexual acts, whether against a woman or a man, violent or nonviolent, by an acquaintance or by a stranger” (190), Estelle Freedman also points to how the distinctions between consensual adult sodomy, on the one hand, and sex between men and boys, on the other, were blurred in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century US because all were illegal and one often was invoked to refer to the other (another instance of a telling metonymic slippage), a conflation that facilitated

(anti-immigrant) homophobic sex panics, and that persists in the *SUV* episode and *jac* article discussed above.<sup>13</sup> I am not willing to go as far as Chait's account of Lacan's conceptualization of the economy of trope, in which the signifier is exchanged for "the original nothingness of the subject" (Lundberg 73) because I don't believe that there is an "original nothingness" in the figure of child molestation; however, insofar as the signifier is contaminated through the history Freedman charts and its contemporary traces, the distance between the signifier and its referent must remain perpetually open to critical interrogation. In thinking through the relationship between child molestation and representations of child molestation, it might be helpful to keep in mind Edelman's distinction between the child and the Child. Denunciation of the latter is not equivalent to demonization of the former. But many cultural forces work against the careful calibration of these distinctions. The culture of sex panic, and the foreclosure of debate around it (as Edelman points out, there seems to be only one side/answer when it comes to the Child (*No Future 2*)), means that any effort to intervene into what's given makes one suspect. (And, surely, the moral high ground of the Giroux and Giroux article's rhetoric makes the case for an open and shut case.)

In her recent reflection on her 1984 "Thinking Sex" article, Rubin articulates the ramifications of this rhetorical suture:

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<sup>13</sup> For further discussion of the historical (homophobic) conflation of homosexuality with pedophilia, see Jenkins. Freedman's nuanced study is attuned to the class-, race-, and anti-immigrant inflections of legal, political, and media discourses around statutory rape, and around all anti-rape campaigns, legislation, and criminal proceedings, insisting on "the centrality of race to the political history of rape" (2). For additional "classic" and contemporary feminist response to and analysis of child sex abuse, and accounts of these responses, see Bass and Thornton, Jenkins (Chapter 6), Reavey and Warner, Sam Warner, and Whittier.

My comments on sex and children were made in a different context, in which I assumed (wrongly, as it turned out) that no one would imagine that I supported the rape of prepubescents. Even now, as I write this, I am aware that whatever I say will be interpreted in the worst possible way by some . . . . But why should even an exploration of such issues need to be done so gingerly, and feel so dangerous? That it does is an indication of something deeply wrong. (“Blood” 39)

It seems to me that I would be rehashing what plenty of others have already established, perhaps even stating the obvious, maybe reproducing the very panic that I am critiquing, and even collaborating in the phobic constructions of gay men as child molesters if I were to spend more time developing the kind of defensive posture that Rubin regrets being pushed into. I certainly hope that my readers will see that I am proceeding from a (pro-)feminist position at the same time that I honor Sedgwick’s crucial insistence that “antihomophobic inquiry is not coextensive with feminist inquiry” (*Epistemology* 27),<sup>14</sup> and that I take for granted the seriousness of child abuse even as I recognize the nonintuitive demands of disentangling child sex abuse from its rhetorical representations and constructions. I am interested in moving beyond that taken-for-grantedness.

Furthermore, my analysis, I hope, is not so much about the *jac* article or *Law and Order: SVU*, as about the larger cultural sublimations that I alluded to at the beginning of

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<sup>14</sup> Certainly, there are feminist displacements that parallel the mechanisms of the panics I trace in this article. In them, some feminist discourses can serve as covers for a variety of sex-related panics. I have already referenced the historical feminist “sex wars” and contemporary sex trafficking panics. Another urgent case in point is the transgender panic--a holdover from the sex wars--that continues to be fanned by Sheila Jeffreys et al. (Of course, there are plenty of feminists who do not share Jeffreys’ transphobia.) See Stone for an account of “radical” feminist responses to transsexuality.

this article. My goal is not necessarily to praise or criticize either the TV episode or the *jac* essay; rather, I deploy these texts as symptomatic stand-ins of the ways in which US cultural expression across a range of registers, including work by politically progressive intellectuals, may enact sex panics and the displacements that I suggest these sex panics activate. I hope that my speculative deconstructive symptomatic readings of the two texts in sections II and III above and of the structures of feeling in which they circulate show that homophobia, homosexual panic, and homophobic anxiety are still quite resilient in our culture, as unevenly illustrated, enacted, and diagnosed by the two texts. When certain forms of explicit homophobia are no longer socially sanctioned, as we know, that doesn't mean that homophobia suddenly disappears. (One could make the same arguments about misogyny and racism.) In a fractured parallel to the manner in which, as Gayle Rubin argues, anti-porn feminism of the 1970s and after used the social stigma against S/M to demonize all pornography ("Blood"), I read in these texts a rechanneling of homophobia into the much more socially acceptable (indeed, socially and legally mandated) denunciation of child molestation. In the case of Giroux and Giroux, we can discern homophobic anxiety seeping through in the concern with the gender of Sandusky's alleged victims. It's the fact that this happened to BOYS that seems particularly horrifying and distressing to the article's authors (and by proxy, to their readers). The male-male relationship propels anxiety as much as the adult-child abuse is the cause of rage. In both the *Law and Order: SVU* "Web" episode and the "Scandalous Politics" article, we can see child molester panic (unconsciously) used as a ruse to assert conserving values across a spectrum of queerphobic rhetorics, whether in shoring up the nuclear family, reasserting heteronormative masculinity, or disavowing sexual practices

and identities that Gayle Rubin in "Thinking Sex" identified as the "outer limits" of sexuality. (The rote invocation by Giroux and Giroux of incest in order to underscore their condemnation of Penn State as an institution in their reference to the "increasingly ideologically incestuous central administration" (65) reminds us how pervasive commonplaces about these outer limits remain 30 years after Rubin's article was first published.)

"Queer" is useful as a methodology for conceptualizing these outer limits of sexuality, even as a generous reading of the phrase "outer limits" itself pushes "queer" to its limits.<sup>15</sup> One way of thinking through "queer" is as an umbrella term to designate a range of dissident, taboo, and legally and socially proscribed sexual and social practices and identities, including/in addition to glbt practices and identities that may or may not intersect with the dissident/taboo/proscribed practices and identities. "Queer" helps us to distinguish between assimilationist glbt practices and identities (e.g., same-sex marriage) that are becoming increasingly socially sanctioned and the more transgressive desires and social structures that give "queer" its outlaw connotation,<sup>16</sup> while at the same time providing a theoretical apparatus to recognize and articulate the resilience of conscious and unconscious backlashes against feminism that have been well-documented by scholars and cultural critics (e.g., Faludi), as well as the continuity of homo- and transphobic prejudice that targets subjects across the spectrum of queerness and that, in fact, exposes the facileness of liberal tolerance of assimilationist gayness.

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<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the potential meanings and deployments of "queer," see Barnard, *Queer Race* (especially Chapter 1); Cohen; Huffer, Chapter 2; Morgensen; Sedgwick, *Tendencies* 8-9 and *Weather* 198-200; Edelman, *No Future*, Chapter 1; Nelson 29, 111.

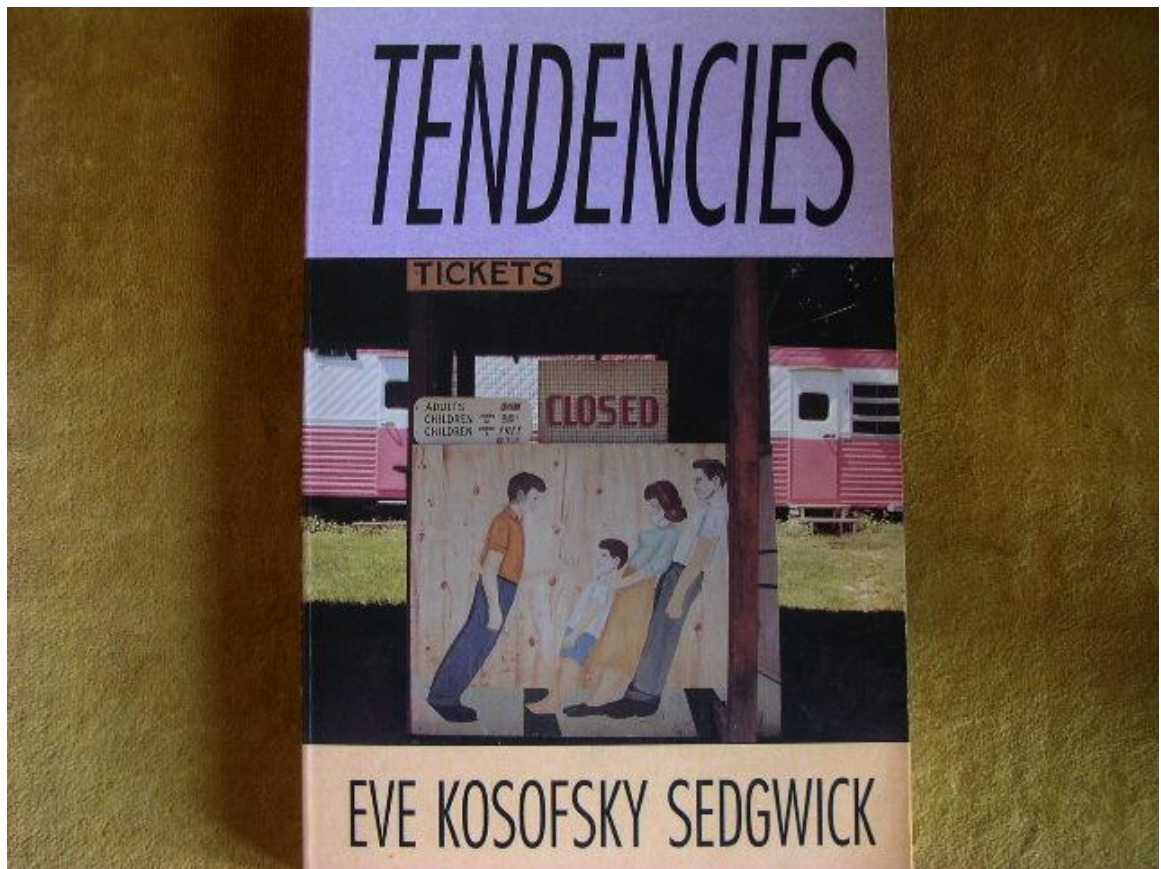
<sup>16</sup> For the queer case against same-sex marriage, and for interrogations of the discourses around same-sex marriage, see Cohen, Conrad, Rosky, Wesling. See Sycamore for some queer polemics against a variety of types of assimilation.

Another way in which scholarly and activist work has pushed queer to its limits is in moving past content to think through methodology and style (e.g., Barnard, “Disciplining”; Franklin, “Queer Art”; Halberstam): what might a queer methodology or style look like? could it be queer even if it didn’t treat queer content? how is queer content delimited? I have already suggested a possible epistemology for which the current article might contribute to a methodological queer pursuit in its political attention to the unsaid and the unconscious, in its flaunting of what Sedgwick termed “paranoid reading” (though in her later work Sedgwick herself was eager to dethrone the hermeneutics of suspicion from its privileged status in the pantheon of critical theory (*Touching* 123-51)). In a discussion of Hocquenghem’s *Homosexual Desire*, Sedgwick notes, “If paranoia reflects the *repression* of same-sex desire, Hocquenghem reasoned, then paranoia is a uniquely privileged site for illuminating not homosexuality itself, as in the Freudian tradition, but rather precisely the mechanisms of homophobic and heterosexist enforcement against it” (*Touching* 126, Sedgwick’s emphasis). Sedgwick was eager to reclaim paranoia from its pathologized status (*Touching* 126), and I see my own reading strategies here as not only necessary for the excavatory task I set out in section I above, but also intersecting with queer’s various declamatory/reclamatory projects (e.g., reclaiming the word “queer”).

My mashing together of non parallel/nonpareil texts (e.g., *Law and Order/jac*) might also conjure up queerness to the extent that propriety is described by heteronormativity and inasmuch as heteronormative discipline operationalizes the oppositions “canonic/noncanonic,” “discipline/terrorism,” and “wholeness/decadence” (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 11). In bringing/clashing together some (apparently) random



things askew/a tergo/affront, I can't help thinking of the tilt in the cover image of Sedgwick's *Tendencies*: a threat, a movement toward, an archaic representation.



Queer's far reach returns/takes me to the "Return of the Repressed" in the subtitle and the grander impetus of the Giroux and Giroux text, as well as to discourses around and about other sex panics that I have not discussed in this article: I'd like to also ask about the larger trajectory of repression in contemporary culture, about the synecdochal meaning of child molestation, sex trafficking, and other sex panics, about the extent to which we can locate these kinds of displacements in other discourses around child molestation, sex trafficking, and sex panics as a whole. What about child molestation cases that are not about male-male sexual relations (for instance, Laura Whitehurst, the

28 year old California English teacher who in June of 2013 had a child fathered by her 17 year old ex-student)? How are or aren't these cases and representations of them imbricated in sex panics and queerness? And in what other ways might cultural, legal, social, and intellectual disciplining of queer bodies, dispositions, and practices persist in the 21st century US and elsewhere, including anxious recuperations of binary gender, anxieties around masculinity, and conventional constructions of gender, even in progressive rhetorics about transgender subjects (see my "Queer's Final Frontier")? Liberal nods to gay inclusion that is non-threatening, that demand sameness, that cannot imagine or stomach radical alterity. Gay characters on TV who never have sex. The desexualized specter of monogamous same-sex marriages. These rhetorics contain/constrain radical queer potential. David Halperin and Kenji Yoshino have recently written of other ways in which queer people are policed, assimilated, normalized, and censored, including and especially cultural and individual self-censorship and internalized phobia in response to economic, political, social, and psychic assimilationist imperatives. And Sedgwick reminds us that rhetorical silences around "gay or proto-gay children" continue to enform cultures of heteronormative violences and gay suicides (*Epistemology* 42-43, *Tendencies* 2-3). So many fissures in the triumphalist narrative of gay civil rights.

The 2013 and 2015 Supreme Court rulings around same-sex marriage in the US, as well as a variety of public opinion polls, ballot initiatives, and other indicators have encouraged activists, ordinary gay people, journalists, and others to hypothesize that the US (and, perhaps, other parts of the globe as well) has reached a turning point in terms of entrenched societal homophobia and heterosexism and public perceptions about gay

people (I am intentionally not using "glbt" here, since even the most optimistic commentators have not suggested that this country has reached comparable breakthroughs when it comes to transgender people, identities, and issues). For instance, in February 2013, even before the recent Supreme Court decisions, CNN, citing gay rights activists, called the Boy Scouts of America's plan to open its membership to gay scouts a "watershed moment in the gay rights movement," and after linking this moment with increasing public receptiveness towards the struggle for marriage equity, concluded triumphantly, "No one is doubting the importance of this particular fight or the ones coming up in the nation's highest court, but many gay rights proponents are buoyed in their belief that a majority of America now stands with them in achieving equal rights for LGBT people. For the first time, they feel victory within reach" (Basu).

Now, of course, there is still a vocal minority of explicit and unapologetic homophobes in the US, but I am more interested in who and what has been caught up in and even propelled the "watershed" and in how homophobic and queerphobic anxieties are repressed and displaced under the watershed's cover. After all, up until the summer of 2015, the Boy Scouts remained off limits to adult gay men (gay scoutmasters continued to be prohibited from participating in the organization even after gay scouts were admitted), a telling holdover that nicely concatenates the residues and resiliences of homophobia with the specter of pedophilia.

Respectability and acceptance come with strings. This is not to deny that the phobic discourses I have excavated may also be the products of unconscious panics around the specter of same-sex marriage itself, whose institutional resonances may not be as benign for some political and cultural composers as they are for me. In both cases

(reaction against same-sex marriage, displacement of homophobic panics), these apparatuses and discourses give the lie to the commonplace that the political advance of same-sex marriage in the US signals the apotheosis of gay rights. Watersheds and backlashes can not only be mutually constitutive, but can also produce doppelgangers that defy teleology.

Giroux and Giroux give a nod to the gay rights movement near the end of their article, noting that "[b]y the early 1970s, gay, lesbian, and transgender groups also fought to gain basic civil rights" before pointing out how the US protest movements of the 20th Century "quickly became the focus of a powerfully organized backlash on the part of conservatives" (77). Gay (or other) rights versus conservatives. I hope that my essay has suggested why this type of binary analysis is too simplistic--and far too comforting--, and has laid out a sense of some of the challenges that scholars, activists, and cultural workers face in tracing the multiple forms and sources and meanderings of "backlash," and in charting their trajectories, contradictions, significances, and consequences.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> I am grateful to Jada Augustine, Kent Baxter, Karli Cerankowski, Jenifer Fennell, Jeanne Gunner, Aneil Rallin, and Joseph T. Thomas for their feedback on earlier pieces of this project and/or their assistance in pointing me toward resources for my work on it. My thanks also to Susan Jarratt for her encouragement and the two anonymous *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* reviewers for their generous and formative advice on previous incarnations of this article.

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